

Environmental firms tap old, new segments

By Brad Carlson

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Demand for environmental work continues in all kinds of economic cycles because there are always individuals and organizations seeking to avoid problems or deal with incidents.

But a portion of overall demand can rise and fall based on regulations and market trends impacting businesses and developers.

At Materials Testing & Inspection Inc., business volume this year outpaced 2006 but remained below the unusually strong 2005, said Rusty Boicourt, environmental services manager and professional geologist. The Boise company this year diversified – performing more services in existing buildings, for example - to make total volume less dependent on new construction, he said.

JBR Environmental Consultants Inc., which is based in Salt Lake City and fields a Boise office, this year performed more work for Rocky Mountain and Great Basin companies seeking federal approval for resource extraction, energy generation and energy transmission projects, said Vice President Brian Buck. Much of this work involved environmental impact statements and assessments.

JBR's Boise office has provided air quality analyses for the environmental impact statements, and in 2007 performed more compliance audits – involving various environmental regulations – compared to previous years, said Dan Heiser, project manager based in Boise.

In Boise, air quality work has increased in the last five to 10 years in part because industrial sources (businesses) have been required to do their own air-dispersion modeling, Heiser said. Many companies enlist environmental firms.

He said the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recently moved to a new model requiring more complex inputs, and the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality “is requiring industry to do a more thorough job in completing their permit applications, particularly for air but also for water.”

Buck said JBR is doing more environmental compliance and permitting work for manufacturing. Another strong segment in 2007 involved assisting local governments and developers secure approval for housing, retail and transportation projects, he said.

Building renovation, rather than replacement, is a big-city

trend that is becoming more common in Boise, Boicourt said. Materials Testing & Inspection's work on existing buildings includes dealing with hazardous materials, and also indoor air quality - per the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification standards.

Renovations also spark demand for building materials strength analysis, and site work such as routing storm water directly into the ground through hydrocarbon-filtering pavement rather than off site via catch basins and pipes, Boicourt said. Environmental firms also can help building owners identify and handle building materials from a demolition or de-construction project that could be recycled or reused.

JBR in the fourth quarter acquired EMS Inc., with offices in Medford and Eugene, Ore. Buck said EMS' groundwater expertise will be important as JBR becomes more involved with manufacturing and urban development, such as when properties change owners or are developed for a different use.

“And everyone wants to retire to the Western U.S. There is more pressure on changing land use,” Buck said.

JBR expects more work related to developing mineral, oil and gas resources in the Rockies and the Great Plains, and more emphasis on renewable energy in the inland and coastal areas, he said.

Officials with Materials Testing and JBR said work on underground fuel storage tanks is in decline. Federal regulations that took effect in the late 1990s produced a wave of projects involving the tanks.

Another market with reduced demand is hazardous waste disposal, partly because the regulatory programs are mature and producers have done a good job getting rid of them, Buck said.

Radon detection is back as a market for environmental services firms, Boicourt said. The firms can block the naturally occurring gas from entering buildings, or mitigate its effects.

“Everybody got ready for it in the late 1990s,” he said. “It fizzled, and now it is slowly picking up.” The EPA “is pushing it more, agencies are shining the spotlight on it, and the market is a little more sophisticated.”

Many homebuyers new to Idaho have experience with radon, toxic mold and similar issues, Boicourt said.

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